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[Home](#)[Leadership](#)[Laboratories](#)[Collaboration](#)[News & Media](#)[Resources](#)

News Releases

NAMRU-SA Research Dentist Competes for IRONMAN "All World Athlete" Status

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Lt. Noel Dickens, Navy research dentist and Head of NAMRU-SA's Biomaterials and Epidemiology Department finishes IRONMAN Texas in 11:34:28 on April 22, 2017. (Photo courtesy of Lt. Noel Dickens)

SAN ANTONIO – “Always trust your training,” said Lt. Noel Dickens, department head, Biomaterials and Epidemiology Department, Naval Medical Research Unit – San Antonio (NAMRU-SA). Dickens, kindly known around NAMRU-SA as ‘The Crusher’ for his indomitable spirit, recently competed in an IRONMAN Texas competition, April 22.

Dickens swam 2.4 miles, biked 112 miles, and ran 26.2 miles to finish in an impressive 11:34:28. His finishing numbers placed him in the top fifteen percent of the participants. “It is almost impossible to take on this challenge without proper training,” said Dickens.

News Releases

[NAMRU-SA Research Dentist Competes for IRONMAN "All World Athlete" Status](#)

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Over the past 12 months, Dickens logged 75 hours in the pool, biked 5,000 miles, ran 1,600 miles, and burned through six pairs of running shoes to train for the competition. “Even with all your preparation, it is still a leap of faith,” said Dickens.

IRONMAN Texas was the first of three IRONMAN events in 2017 in which he will attempt to qualify as an “All World Athlete.” That title is reserved for the top ten percent of all IRONMAN participants. Dickens used this goal to push through mental and physical exhaustion associated with the constant grind of training.

The IRONMAN World Championship was created by U.S. Navy Commander John Collins and his wife Judy with the first race occurring on the shores of Waikiki, Hawaii in 1978. Dickens was inspired to compete after learning about the competition’s Navy ties back to the inaugural event.

“It was the distinct Navy connections through the founders that made me want to compete in an IRONMAN,” said Dickens.

When Dickens is not battling for IRONMAN victory, he is channeling his competitive spirit in his research at NAMRU-SA to support warfighter readiness by controlling dental caries and reducing operational dental emergencies. Dental caries is one of the most prevalent chronic diseases of people worldwide and represents the number one cause of dental emergencies among deployed military personnel. Navy dentists conduct annual oral examinations on all active duty personnel to include a caries risk assessment and classify each patient as low, moderate, and high risk for caries development. Those members who are classified as high or moderate risk are targeted with a prescribed Oral Disease Risk management Protocol to improve their oral health status and decrease their risk of a dental emergency. The purpose of Dickens’ study is to examine the association between the Navy’s caries risk management program and improvements in clinical measures associated with increased caries risk.

NAMRU-SA’s mission is focused on ways to enhance the health, safety, performance, and operational readiness of Navy and Marine Corps personnel and addresses their emergent medical and dental problems in routine and combat operations.

“It is amazing how much you can push your body and still keep going,” said Dickens.

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Annual NATO Chess Tournament

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About US

Laboratories
NMRC
NHRC
NSMRL
NAMRU-D
NAMRU-SA
NMRC-Asia
NAMRU-3
NAMRU-6

Collaboration
Working With Us
Partnerships
Research Services
Naval Research
Business Contacts

News
News & Media
News
Releases
Fact Sheets
Newsletters
Media
Inquiries

Resources
BUMED
Gorgas/WRAIR
Library
MED IG Hotline
MHS
NSC
ONR
USUHS
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